



## Managing Mood without Using Food

People eat for many different reasons. True hunger is the healthiest reason to eat. Learning to eat in response to physical cues, such as hunger pangs, is a very important skill for managing calorie intake. Unfortunately, emotions, both positive and negative, can trigger the desire to eat for many people. This is called psychological hunger.

Eating in response to psychological hunger can be difficult to distinguish from the hunger associated with the body's need for food. You can use a food log to help you pay attention to how you're feeling when you eat, and what situations trigger you to eat when you're not physically hungry.

### Why are people emotional eaters?

Food is a mood manager for different reasons. For some people, it is a way to escape from uncomfortable emotions, such as stress, anger, or boredom. Food and eating can also enhance positive feelings, such as celebration and relaxation. Food provides comfort during times of sadness and people often describe food as soothing, numbing, or distracting. Some people even describe food as a trusted and familiar friend.

You may already be aware of certain emotions that influence how you eat. Do these emotions affect your food choices and eating patterns?

- Loneliness
- Anger
- Fatigue
- Excitement
- Depression
- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Feelings of guilt
- Stress
- Happiness
- Boredom

### The Cycle of Emotional Eating

For many people, emotional eating is a significant barrier to healthy eating and calorie management. Once you begin to recognize that your urges to eat may be triggered by emotions, it's important that you develop more positive coping strategies. The goal is to take the place of some, if not all, of the emotionally satisfying benefits that food and eating provide. A good place to start is to answer the following questions:

***How do food and eating help me deal with my emotions?***

***What need is food and eating satisfying?***

***How can I get these needs met in another way?***

By tracking how your emotions influence your choices, you can learn to recognize when you're at risk for experiencing one of your triggering emotions. Once you've identified the emotion, you can make plans to deal with the emotion with a more healthful alternative.

### Healthy Alternatives for Managing Mood

It's easy to turn to food to satisfy an emotional need or to control your mood. Not all alternatives will provide the immediate benefits that food and eating can provide; however, over time, you can find alternatives that satisfy your needs and help you achieve your healthy eating goals. Keep in mind that a strategy that works great at home may not work at the office, or in the car, so you will need to be creative in coming up with strategies that will work in different situations. Try to find alternatives that are available and convenient in a variety of situations.

Here's a list of ideas for alternative strategies for learning to manage your mood without using food. Use this list to help you brainstorm strategies that might work for you.

**Deep Breathing and Other Relaxation Techniques** - Relaxation exercises are great for managing mood. These techniques provide you with a chance to slow down and consider the thoughts and feelings that might be triggering you to eat when you're not physically hungry. By relaxing before you make a choice, you're giving yourself time to plan for a more helpful response to your emotion.

**Soothing Alternatives** - There are many different types of activities that can be soothing and comforting. Alternatives for mood management include being with a pet, listening to music, taking a warm bath, reading, doing a hobby, drinking a cup of tea, praying, meditating, and getting a massage. What are activities that are soothing and comforting for you?

**Distracting Alternatives** - Many times, urges to eat will pass after a few minutes. One very helpful strategy is to distract yourself. Find activities, such as calling a friend, working around the house, going for a brisk walk, praying, meditating, or reading, that will delay your decision to eat for 10 minutes, or so. Reevaluate your hunger and your urge to eat after you've taken a time-out.  
Identify and express your feelings.

Often times, the urge to eat is triggered by the inability to express your emotion in other more helpful ways. Use the information from this article to help you identify your emotions and then find ways to talk it out with someone. Great strategies include calling a friend, journaling, writing a letter, or confronting a person who upset you.

**Positive Self-Talk** - Try to turn negative and unproductive thoughts into more helpful and productive ways of thinking. For example, rather than saying "I ate way too many calories," tell yourself "I'll account for these extra calories by eating a little less and moving a bit more the next couple of days."

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